

# HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE

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## ANOTHER LOOK

The Bible and Contemporary Issues is a series of occasional papers on moral/cultural issues of current importance produced by the Cumberland Center for Justice and Peace.

For many people the key to determining and defending their position on such difficult issues as homosexuality, abortion, capital punishment, and poverty are the teachings of their religious tradition. For many Americans, the Bible is the central teaching of their faith, and in recent years, the Bible has been brought increasingly into the public debate on social issues. We are all aware, however, that there are major controversies over the meaning of biblical texts and the guidance they offer.

We at the Cumberland Center think that we are well situated to contribute to this critical discussion. Although the Center itself is non-sectarian, participants in this project include committed Christians, some of whom are recognized biblical and theological scholars, and who have access to a community of Christian scholars and a theological library. Included also are members with different belief perspectives who help challenge and question. Our continuing dialogue about the Bible and contemporary social issues has forced each of us to examine core assumptions more carefully, to identify the evidence for our conclusions more closely, and to articulate our views more clearly.

We hope that our papers will challenge you to enter this discussion and to engage your own friends and family to do the same.

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*While we are very grateful for the invaluable help of our consultants on this project, the conclusions drawn in this paper are solely those of the Cumberland Center.*

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# HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE— ANOTHER LOOK

Christian churches in this country are in the midst of a great struggle over the issue of homosexuality. Some believe that homosexual acts are against God's law as set down in the scriptures and that there is no room for debate. Other Christians believe that they are called by the Gospel to acceptance. Many more are still struggling with the issue.

The purpose of this paper is to look more closely at what the Bible actually says and does not say about homosexuality, to discuss the contexts in which particular passages were written, and to explore interpretations that might help us respond to this issue.

The first part of this paper will be a highly simplified summary of the major points that will be made. The rest of the paper will be a more thorough explanation of these points, with biblical texts and references (itself simplified because of the length of the paper) followed by a list of sources and resources for further study.

There are seven places where homosexual acts appear to be referred to in the Bible, three in the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) and four in the Christian Scriptures (New Testament). All of the quotations from Bible in this paper are from the New Revised Standard Version.

## SUMMARY

### Old Testament

Although not mentioned in the Ten Commandments or in the lists of sexual sins in Exodus and Deuteronomy, a law against sexual intercourse between males appears in Leviticus (18:22, 20:13). Because male prostitution was part of idol worship in those days, the Israelites associated sex between men with worshipping idols which was against the first of the Ten Commandments. The Israelites also thought that it was shaming for a man to act as a woman, and that sex between men was abusive because it shamed a man. Sexual acts between women are not banned anywhere in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Paul writes that, for Christians, authority comes from the Spirit and not from the Hebrew law. Indeed, there are other parts of the Leviticus law (like the keeping of slaves) that Christians no longer believe to be God's will. The appearance of this

law against male homosexual acts in Leviticus does not make it automatically binding for Christians today.

In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18,19), the Sodomites threaten Lot's visitors (who are angels of God) with an ordeal which, if sexual at all, was one of gang rape. This story says nothing about the question of homosexual acts between consenting adults. Despite the long popular tradition, nowhere else in the Old Testament or in the sayings of Jesus is the sin of Sodom referred to as homosexuality.

## New Testament

Jesus does not teach against homosexual acts anywhere in the New Testament—not in any of his sayings, or stories, or in his lists of sexual offenses.

In Romans (1:26–27), Paul condemns the sexual misconduct of Greeks of his time. We know that in Greece, in biblical times, sexual activity between older heterosexual men and adolescent males was a common practice. The meaning of Paul's reference to the sexual misconduct of Greek women (the only statement in the Bible which could be seen as referring to sex between women) is unclear. Whatever the meaning, Paul is apparently speaking about the acts of heterosexual women.

The original Greek words Paul used in his teachings in I Corinthians 6:9–10 and in I Timothy 1:9–10 (translated as “sodomites”, although no reference to Sodom appears in the original text) are words that were associated with male prostitution and acts which were considered abusive.

In Jude (v.7), the sin of Sodom is, for the only time in the Bible, associated with sexual sin. The Sodomites’ “unnatural lust”, however, probably refers here to the intercourse between humans and angels, and is, in any case, that of rape.

## Implications for today:

These passages from the Bible are about male homosexual acts which were thought of as abusive and/or as having the taint of idolatry. These statements tell us little about God's will for Christian churches as they seek to respond to loving, committed, adult homosexual relationships between persons of faith.

Psychology has not found any consistent psychological causes of homosexuality, and the American Psychiatric Association no longer considers it a disorder. While some people who have had homosexual feelings and experiences become heterosexual, there is now strong evidence that,

for others, their homosexual orientation is not something they can change. The spiritual journeys of many such people reveal that, for them, the road to God and to wholeness lies in accepting their homosexuality. It is the authenticity of their stories that challenges Christian churches to a new approach to homosexual people.

There are many passages throughout the Bible (e.g., Leviticus 19:33, Isaiah 56:6–8. Acts 10:28–35, Galatians 3:28) that call the people of God to accept and do justice to those who are different and who have been rejected. It is a major theme of the Bible. These passages about inclusion provide a strong biblical foundation for the full acceptance of homosexual people who wish to live faithfully within Christian church communities, and for supporting civil rights under the law for homosexual persons.

## PASSAGES FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

1) “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” Leviticus 18:22

This passage is part of the Holiness Code which elaborates on the Ten Commandments given to Moses (Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21). Unlike adultery, this prohibition does not appear in the Ten Commandments or in the lists of sexual offenses in Exodus or Deuteronomy. The Leviticus code includes dietary regulations; instructions for leaving the gleanings of the harvest for the poor; a prohibition against a man shaving off his beard; prohibitions about touching the person, clothing, bedding or chair of a menstruating woman; and a prohibition against borrowing or lending money at interest. The Leviticus code permits the acquiring and keeping of slaves.

The code is written to apply to men, women being specifically mentioned only when one of the laws applies to them (as the prohibition against bestiality, Lev. 18:23). Sexual acts between women are not prohibited in the Leviticus code, or in any other place in the Hebrew scriptures.

The meaning of the word translated as “abomination” is the key to understanding this prohibition. This word was used very specifically to mean the desecration associated with the worship of idols. We learn in Kings that Baal worship involved male temple prostitution, which is mentioned as one of their “abominations” (1 Kings 14:24). Because of

male temple prostitution, homosexual intercourse had the taint of idol worship in that culture, and would have been seen as unclean for that reason. The Israelites of that time also believed that it shamed a man to act as a woman; therefore this homosexual act was seen as one man shaming another—an act of abuse.

2) “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death.” Leviticus 20:13

The prohibition is here put in the company of what are considered capital offenses. The list includes cursing one’s parents, adultery, incest and bestiality. Again the use of the term “abomination” alerts us to its association with idol worship. Any act which implied a violation of the first commandment against worshipping idols was a major offense. That this act was seen by the Israelites as inherently abusive, because it was shaming, also sheds light on its inclusion in this list along with various forms of incest.

The question arises as to how binding these codes are for Christians, whatever their interpretation. The commandments of God continued to change and evolve in the Hebrew scriptures themselves as the Israelites faced new situations and received new teachings. The prohibition against outcasts, foreigners and eunuchs serving in the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1–3), for instance, was overturned in Isaiah 56:3–6. Jesus, by his healing on the sabbath and eating with people considered by the law to be unclean (John 5:16–17, Matthew 9:10–12), taught that no law superseded the great commandments to love God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40). Paul taught that “we are slaves not under the old written code, but in the new life of the Spirit” (Romans 7:6). The Leviticus law allowing slavery is now considered by Christians to be contrary to God’s will. While Christians may look to the law for guidance, the belief that they are bound to the Leviticus code in any absolute or legalistic way is difficult to justify on the basis of scripture.

3) The story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis 18:20–19:11

In this story, God hears the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah—“how very grave their sin.” After Abraham bargains with God, God sends two angels to Sodom to visit the house of Lot, in order to see if

there are any just people in Sodom. While the angels are there, the men of Sodom surround the house and demand that Lot send out the visitors so that they might “know them.” Lot, believing that they intend to harm his guests, refuses to send them out, and offers instead to send out his own daughters for them to do with as they please. The angels then bring Lot inside and strike the men outside with blindness so that they cannot find the door.

Current biblical scholarship challenges the popular notion that the homosexuality of the Sodomites was the reason for God’s wrath. Earlier in Genesis (13:13), it simply says that “the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.” Although the story of the destruction of Sodom is referred to more times in the Bible than any other story in Genesis, none of the other references to it in the Hebrew scripture, or in the words of Jesus, associates Sodom’s sin with homosexuality. The sin of Sodom is described as worshipping other gods (Deuteronomy 29:22–26), failure to seek justice, rescue the poor, or defend the widows and orphans (Isaiah 1:10–17), adultery and lying (Jeremiah 23:14), “grinding the face of the poor” (Isaiah 3:9–15), gluttony, pride and “prosperous ease” (Ezekiel 16:48). Jesus likens the destruction of Sodom and the unpreparedness of its people to the suddenness of the “day that the Son of Man is revealed” (Luke 17:28–30).

Scholars also question the interpretation that it is homosexual rape that was intended by the Sodomites. Of the 943 uses of the Hebrew word “yadha” (“to know”) in the Hebrew scriptures, it is used only ten times to clearly mean sexual intercourse. To test strangers by some kind of challenge or ordeal, as a way of “knowing them”, was common practice. Even if rape was part of the intended threat, these men are not portrayed here as notoriously homosexual, since Lot offers his daughters to them to protect his visitors.

This story is given a good deal of weight in the debate over homosexuality and the Bible. But we must question the use of a story in which a man offers his daughters for gang rape as a guide to sexual morality. The story might better be used, as it was by Jesus and in the Hebrew scriptures, as a warning to societies which show hostility (rather than hospitality) to strangers, abandon God, fail to do justice to the poor, and ignore God’s calls to repentance.

unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” Jude v.7

Here, for the one and only time in the Bible, the sin of Sodom is described as sexual. Some biblical scholars believe that in this passage, the “unnatural lust,” also translated as “going after strange flesh,” refers to the sexual contact between angels and humans, which violates the natural order of beings. This interpretation make sense of the previous sentence about the transgression of the angels to which the Sodom story is compared. Even if we believe that it is the homosexuality of the acts which is being referred to here, we must remember that the intended acts in this story were violent.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

There is little question among Christians that violent, abusive, pedophilic or predatory sex (homosexual or heterosexual) is contrary to God’s will. Whether by their association with male prostitution, or because they were acts which shamed a man or were violent, the homosexual acts referred to in the above scriptures were clearly seen as abusive sexual acts and/or acts which had the taint of idolatry.

Today Christian churches are being confronted with a phenomenon which is not addressed in the Bible: gay and lesbian couples, equal adults who have formed committed, monogamous relationships, who are committed to God and wish to be full participants in the life of their churches. Single Christians who have accepted their own homosexuality wish to be seen by their churches as whole and acceptable. Such people do not fit into the categories of the ungodly and the unclean described in the above scriptures. One would be hard put to make the case that all practicing gay and lesbian people today have abusive relationships, or that their sexuality is connected to idolatry. The relationships of these committed homosexual people are more like the biblical story of David and Jonathan whose love (whether actively sexual) was described as deep, faithful and covenanted (I Samuel 20:17, 41–42): “greatly beloved were you to me: your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” (2 Samuel 1:26).

## HOMOSEXUALITY

Our understanding of homosexuality has expanded since biblical times. In 1974, after decades of work with homosexual people, the American Psychiatric Association dropped homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, determining that it did not meet the criteria for a disorder. Homosexuality, they observed, encompasses a wide range of experience and behavior. A significant proportion of practicing homosexual people show no signs of mental illness and lead constructive lives. Some people who have had homosexual feelings and experiences and are in conflict about their sexuality, may eventually become heterosexual. Others who are in conflict about their sexuality find wellness only in adapting to their homosexuality.

No predictable set of psychological patterns or dysfunctions were found to cause homosexuality, and many in the field believed twenty years ago that it was, for many, a naturally occurring variant of human sexuality. In 1993, researchers at the National Cancer Institute found strong evidence that there is a gene which predisposes some males to become homosexual. Subsequent research has supported those findings. Other research found differences in the hypothalamus and adjacent brain structures in some homosexual men. Such structures can be affected by both genetic and postnatal influences. While such research is still unfolding and its meaning debated, it helps us understand those who experience their attraction to the same sex as a “given” and not amenable to change.

## DISCERNMENT IN THE CHURCH

If, then, we understand that homosexuality is not a disorder; and if we understand that homosexual orientation is a reality, and that for some it may have a genetic component; and if we understand the biblical prohibitions to be against male homosexual acts which were seen as connected to the worship of idols, or which, because of cultural beliefs, were seen as shaming and abusive; and if we understand that nowhere in the Bible is lesbianism clearly addressed or prohibited, then the door is open to a new response to homosexual people.

New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, suggests that we must listen to the faith narratives of homosexual people—the stories of their journeys with

God—to discern what the church's response should be. These personal stories reveal that it is the experience of many homosexual Christians that their faithfulness to God, their road to wholeness and service, lies in their acceptance rather than their rejection of their sexual orientation. To be sure, there are others who have had homosexual experience who perceive that their path to God and to peace lies in becoming heterosexual. But by hearing the witness of those who feel called by God to accept their homosexuality, and by personally encountering the authenticity of their lives, many Christians have moved toward acceptance.

## OTHER BIBLICAL GUIDANCE

In Isaiah 56:3–8, the earlier prohibition against certain outcasts serving in the temple was reversed by a new teaching received from God. The new criterion for acceptance for those who were previously excluded was faithfulness to God.

“And the foreigners who join  
themselves to the Lord,  
to minister to him, to love  
the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants . . .  
these will I bring to my holy  
mountain,  
and make them joyful in  
my house of prayer; . . .  
for my house shall be called  
a house of prayer  
for all peoples.  
Thus says the Lord God,  
who gathers the outcasts  
of Israel,  
I will gather others to them  
besides those already  
gathered.”

Isaiah 56:6–8

Again in Acts, Peter, after receiving a vision from God, says “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate or visit with a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. . . . I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:28, 34–35)

In searching for biblical guidance about the issue of contemporary homosexuality, we must consider the countless passages like these from Isaiah and Acts which call the people of God to inclusion and justice for those who are different (Leviticus 19:33, Galatians 3:28). This central biblical imperative and the witness of those who have struggled with what it means to be homosexual and to be faithful to God challenge Christian churches to full acceptance (to all levels of ministry and in the blessing of covenanted unions) of gay and lesbian people who wish to live faithfully within their communities. Such faithfulness would involve the same standards of commitment, monogamy, and non-abusive behavior that apply to heterosexual people. The same processes of discernment and instruction would apply. This biblical call to inclusion also challenges churches to support full civil rights and protection under the law for homosexual people.

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